

Committee Secretary
Select Committee on the National Broadband Network
The Senate
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

Dear Committee,

We are pleased to submit to the Select Committee on the National Broadband Network.

Australia's broadband infrastructure lags well behind that of comparable nations. In 2007 the OECD ranked Australia second last among developed nations in the speed and price of its broadband services. There is also a profound inequality of access to those broadband services that do exist. This year, the Australian Communications and Media Authority Reported that a full third of Australia's Internet users – or two million households – are still connected at speeds of 256 kilobytes per second or less. This figure, of course, does not include those who cannot obtain a reliable Internet service at all.

GetUp! therefore welcomes the government's commitment to large-scale investment in broadband infrastructure as a significant effort at nation-building. The aim of providing 98% of Australian homes with broadband access is laudable. But it is important that the money is well-targeted. This means getting the technology right, putting together the best possible partnership for building the network, and maximizing economic utility. But it also means making sure that the national investment is squarely aimed at correcting current disadvantage, building social capital, and encouraging civic engagement. It also means that resources are earmarked for building technological literacy and awareness of the affordances of Internet technologies.

The Internet is now central as a vector of education, communication, commerce, culture and social and political exchange. Globally, many of the most innovative online communities, products and services are premised on users' access to broadband. A great deal of social innovation and economic growth in developed nations is now premised on the development or use of innovative online technologies and services. Without significant and careful investment, Australians – especially those in regional, rural and remote areas – will continue to be disadvantaged across all of these areas. Technological literacies are evolving along with technologies and services - the longer that some Australians are deprived of the opportunities that broadband brings, the less their capacity will be to engage with newer technologies as they emerge.

As an organization that uses ICTs extensively, we are keenly aware of the potential of online technologies, and the extent to which Australians have used them to build community engagement and extend their involvement in the political process. Organisations like GetUp! use online technologies to mobilize citizens around topical issues and causes. Many citizens build or participate in other online forums for social and political action. Australia's political blogosphere is lively and diverse – a range of independent sites now serve as forums for political opinion and debate. Emerging online tools – like OpenAustralia or our own Project Democracy – allow greater ease of access to parliamentary information. Tools for online content syndication and aggregation allow

citizens to customize their media diet, and a new emphasis on user-generated content allows people to produce their own news and commentary. Increasingly, citizens expect government agencies, politicians and political parties to provide informative and responsive websites.

In order to address inequality of access and gaps in technology, and in order to maximize social utility, we propose a number of priorities for this investment, which are also criteria according to which we believe the broadband rollout should be judged.

The investment should be judged and evaluated on how well it addresses current disadvantage, and the extent to which it closes the digital divide between different parts of the Australian community. For us, maximum megabytes per second speeds in areas of high population density are less important than relative equality of access throughout the community as a whole. Providing adequate services to rural, regional and remote Australia will not only help stimulate regional economies, but will mean that citizens in non-metropolitan areas can be included more thoroughly in online efforts at social engagement and political participation. Adopting this priority may limit the degree of private profit that comes from the investment, but spending this amount of public money should be aimed at addressing the needs of communities, not the priorities of telecommunications players.

The investment should also aim at building social capital and political and social engagement alongside maximizing economic benefits. This means that alongside a focus on technological capacity, there should also be consideration given to promoting technological literacies and an awareness of existing opportunities and emerging services. The investment should provide for literacy programmes, and for work with community groups and community leaders to promote the advantages of the new network.

In providing improved infrastructure, it is also vital that the Government itself and its agencies undertake to provide more accessible and responsive online services. This means adopting best practices in

- Online comment and feedback mechanisms
- Information distribution and publication
- Online service delivery
- Collaborative policy development.

Working towards these objectives would provide part of the rationale for any broadband investment. Providing world-class online and e-government services would match the investment in a world-class broadband network.

We look forward to providing more detail on this submission at the Inquiry's hearing.

Kind Regards

Jason Wilson
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GetUp!

About GetUp: *GetUp.org.au is an independent movement to build a progressive Australia. GetUp brings together like-minded people who want to bring participation back into our democracy. GetUp has over 280,000 members nationwide, more than every political party combined. www.getup.org.au*

